Bird Brained Science:

An ode to our salty kin

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Gull flocks are organized groups governed by choreographed body postures, specific calls and shared survival strategies rather than random gathering. They also have their own language for socializing with each other.

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Seagulls aren't real. I don't mean this in the sense that "birds are government surveillance drones." Our government uses a different kind of "Flock" for that purpose. Instead, I am referring to seagulls' classification as a species, or rather, their lack thereof. Seagulls exist as a kind of composite species — a colloquial term for a selection of seabirds existing under the subfamily Larinae. These gulls each bear a remarkable resemblance toward each other, often leading to the false impression that they exist as one singular species. In total, 54 distinct gull species have been recorded.

Seagulls get a bad rap. They're viewed as a saltier and louder version of the pigeon — an oceanic invader that infiltrates our cities, steals our fries and exists willfully as little more than a general nuisance. Beneath their stand-offish and sardonic nature, however, is a truly remarkable creature. It is one that, while maybe not deserving of our unrequited love, does owe our begrudging respect.

For one, the seeming omnipresence of seagulls is no coincidence. The birds are one of few creatures, aside from people, to call nearly every corner of our planet home. They are even known to breed in places considered inhospitable to humans, including Antarctica and the high Arctic. Though the majority of gulls prefer coastal colonies, they are considered a cosmopolitan species and have adapted to exist alongside people in relative comfort. Even here in Storrs, we have a few flocks — often spotted circling Peter J. Werth Residence Tower.

The secret to these sea rats' impressive range is their unique composition of traits, evolved over millennia to create a creature that amounts to what is basically a flying Swiss Army knife.

Seagulls are considered expert flyers in the world of ornithology. Cruising at speeds that can reach as high as 28 miles per hour, seagulls typically forage within 25 miles of their roost but are known to fly nonstop as far as 80 miles when traveling the open ocean. When these birds do tire, they take advantage of their long, pointed wings to soar across localized wind and air currents, increasing their mileage substantially.

These impressive migrations are aided by the seagull's other traits that make them an expert survivor in any environment. Resting above their eyes, for instance, are special salt glands, allowing the birds to drink sea water without consequences. Excess salt is flushed out from their noses.

Though unsavory, a seagull's diet is just as important when defining their distinct position in the animal kingdom. Many seagulls are, by nature, kleptoparasites. This form of feeding is a very fancy way of defining the creatures as natural thieves. Though we are used to seeing this when a seagull steals snacks on the beach, gulls are even more willing to utilize this behavior against their wilder counterparts. Seagulls have been observed stealing fish from pelicans' beaks, and even more oddly, taking milk from elephant seals' teats.

Despite their sticky-fingered tendencies, seagulls are formidable predators in their own right. The birds are one of the few non-human creatures on this planet to demonstrate a species-wide adeptness for basic tool use. Gulls have been consistently observed using stolen bread as bait for fish, and they are able to calculate the ideal heights needed to crack open the shells of otherwise inaccessible shellfish.

More terrifying is their ability to hunt in packs. In a practice reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds," flocks of gulls have been observed landing on surfacing whales and pecking at the ocean giants' skin to collect small shreds of meat.

Seagulls are also social creatures, similar to us humans. Both gregarious and vocal, the harsh mewing, wailing and squawking calls of seagulls pollute the skies of dumpsters, beaches and streets alike. These calls make up a complex language that can carry a multitude of meanings. These oral cues are often paired with ornate body language, such as the head-to-surtout or head toss, which can signal both dominance and submission.

It is these systems of communication that allow seagulls to form the strong communal bonds that make up their colonies. Seagulls are known to mate for life, though they have been recorded "divorcing" over squabbles related to family-raising. Regardless, they return to the same nesting ground year after year. Gulls maintain strong ties with their neighbors and are known to band together to mob and chase away predators.

In these senses, seagulls are remarkably human. Social, stubborn, aggravating and resourceful, the birds are in many ways a foil of ourselves. Admittedly, these similarities are not necessarily compliments. These same traits, demonstrated by humans, have led to the collapse of ecosystems worldwide and the ongoing reality of climate change. Demonstrated in a family of sea-faring birds, though, we can at least share some sense of kinship — just not our fries.

'STRANGER THINGS' IS BACK WITH 'TALES FROM '85' SEASON 2

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Season 2 of "Stranger Things: Tales From '85" premiered yesterday on Netflix just five months after the release of the first season. This season, like the last, contains eight episodes that are about 30 minutes each.

In an effort to keep the franchise alive and offer the beloved storyline to a younger audience, The Duffer Brothers gave fans season 1 of "Tales From '85" just three months after the final season of the live action "Stranger Things" concluded.

Season 1 of "Tales From '85" fills the time gap between season 2 and season 3 of the original series, focusing mainly on the adventures of Will, Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Eleven and Max, with the addition of their new friend, Nikki.

At the end of the first season, after the group took on new monsters, Eleven closed the gate to the Upside Down. Leading us into the second season, a blue flower sprouted from the remains of the monster the kids defeated, foreshadowing the premise of season 2.

The show uses a unique but nostalgic cartoon style that aims to engage a younger audience, omitting the dark and mature content the original series included.

The series' structure reminds me of a modern-day "Scooby-Doo." Cartoons like these not only entertain children but force them to employ logic while watching. Like "Scooby-Doo," the characters solving mysteries and looking for clues encourages active engagement rather than tuning out.

Although the cartoon brings the characters on smaller-scale adventures, with monsters from the Upside Down that were absent in the original series, they still share many parallels, such as character mannerisms and group dynamics.

To me, the ending of the live action series, where almost every character miraculously survived, proved that the producers of "Stranger Things" often neglect logic for what fans want to see. However, after watching "Tales From '85" it is apparent to me that the Duffer Brothers enjoyed creating a show in which they could be creative with their storylines without dealing with the pressure of fan reactions.

Last year, the final season of "Stranger Things" captivated what seemed like the entire world. For the entire month of December, it was all anyone was talking about. The finale was so highly anticipated that AMC and other companies offered special showings in theaters; Target had a specialized "Stranger Things" section, and it seemed like every video I watched on social media was some sort of edit. After being extremely devoted to both the characters and universe for 10 years, it made sense when fans immediately had withdrawals.

"Tales From '85" works to give fans more content to engage with, allowing them to slowly wean themselves off the drug that is "Stranger Things."



A still shot from Netflix's "Stranger Things: Tales From '85" Season 2 premiere. The second season premiered five months after the first.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NETFLIX.



A still shot from Netflix's "Stranger Things: Tales From '85" Season 2 premiere of characters Eleven and Nikki Baxter. The show is an animated spinoff akin to "Scooby Doo."

PHOTO COURTESY OF NETFLIX.

RATING:
4/5

SUBOG Weekly Events:

September 13th - September 20th

Giants vs Cowboys Travel Trip – Details located on our Instagram

Suicide Prevention Week – A Talk with Chamique Holdsclaw – 7 pm – 8pm in SU Theatre

Dive Into SUBOG – 2 pm – 5pm – SU Mall

Six Flags Travel Trip – Details located on our Instagram

Any questions? Email subog@uconn.edu and check out @subogatuconn on Instagram for updates on our events!